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F O C I

Forms Of Contemporary Illinois



"Chip Off the Old Block," 1988

ILLINOIS DOCUMENTS

The Illinois State Museum SEP 25 1989

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JIM LUTES

Introduction

The Illinois State Museum proudly presents the first installment of the new program entitled “FOCI”, (Forms of Contemporary Illinois). We are delighted to present the paintings of Jim Lutes in his first solo exhibition outside the gallery setting. “FOCI” has been designed as a forum for art work which is absolutely current. Each solo exhibition will focus on a contemporary Illinois artist with a particular and significant approach to art making.

In today’s art world we live in an age of “stylistic plenitude”, according to art critic Donald Kuspit, where “just about anything goes”, while art movements seemingly come and go overnight. “FOCI” will explore the diverse range of approaches that now exist in the field of contemporary art, by presenting three widely divergent solo shows annually. By choosing artists who’s work represents a key element of this “pluralist art picture”, whether a focus on a stylistic trend, (eg., “Neo-Geo”, or “Simulationist”), or an aesthetic posture which exemplifies an artistic direction, (eg., spiritual vs. non-spiritual abstraction) or issues currently impacting the dialog of the artistic community of the State, (eg., censorship, racism), “FOCI” will help you “keep a finger on the pulse” of the art world of Illinois.

I am often asked why I choose the subject matter I do, and the answer is that I don't — it seems to choose me. This question is usually asked by those who miss the humor in my work. I can only paint that which I know firsthand, so, until life becomes an endless series of sunny days in a perfect world, expect more of the same. —Jim Lutes.

Jim Lutes: Firsthand

Jim Lutes depicts the gritty reality of urban decay. Positioning himself at the center of his work, the subject matter ranges from a personal investigation of the destructive effects of overconsumption, vice, and obsession to contrasting memories of his more innocent youth. He travels the distance between exterior “everyday” reality to that inner realm of the mind at work, bringing to the surface of his canvases a “representation” of what’s going on “inside” the artist. His highly personal and idiosyncratic images pose questions which force us to look at ourselves.

Lutes was introduced early to the conflict between need and desire (a primary recurrent theme in his paintings) and the fact that oftentimes things are not what they appear to be on the surface. He was born and raised in southeastern Washington in the city of Richland, a town like countless other small towns in its dependency on a single industry which employed most of its residents. The company, in this case, was the Hanford Nuclear Defense plant. The jobs provided passports to the “American Dream” for Lutes’ parents and grandparents. The tacit acceptance of the plant’s devastating product made them unwitting participants in the event which ended World War II. The knowledge of this event exposed his world as an “imperfect” place. Here was the quiet complicity pervasive in our world which is fouling itself with it’s own production. Lutes would take this psychological “baggage” with him when he left the Northwest.

When Lutes moved to Chicago he discovered an accepting and incubative environment created by a long tradition of internalized painting represented by such artists as Julia Thecla, Seymour Rosofsky, and Ellen Lanyon, as well as Imagist and Post-Imagist painters such as



“On A Roll,” 1985

Roger Brown, Jim Nutt, Hollis Sigler and Phyllis Bramson. After struggling with influences and ideas impressed upon him in undergraduate school, he formed his own visual voice shortly after his arrival here. "I never liked art history, because it took me so long to work out from under its influences. Finally I just said forget it; I was going to paint things my way whether it was liked or not." A 1982 painting entitled "Jane Gets Her Way" was stylistically a pivotal work for Lutes. "I found it necessary to respond to internalized ideas without the influence of other styles. [I had] to throw the baggage of art history out the window."

His is an "Ash Can school" approach to paint. Like the Ash Can school painters, George Bellows and John Sloan, part of Lutes' imagery is of the low-end city neighborhood where he chooses to live. In it he stalks the mundane and occasionally beautiful side of his subject. In "Goodbye Milwaukee Ave.," he captures with a journalistic eye a romantic view of a moonlit night from his Milwaukee Avenue studio. Here the light of nature and the lights of the shops balance and echo each other in a rare moment of harmony.

Rather than the "straight take," Lutes is better known for layered images colliding with each other. Characteristic are works like "On a Roll," "Paradise Without a Match," "Mondo Condo," and "111 Days" where an eccentric "surrealist/fantast" handling of space welds images from memory and fantasy. In these paintings we look through the surface of his canvas as if it were a grimy window pane with areas rubbed clean. We view images staged in the mind's inner regions — floating beer bottles, toilets flung open, wretched debris strewn streets, ash trays piled with butts, fractured landscapes populated by the disfigured — as a clashing, kaleidoscopic structure which sprawls across the picture plane.

Lutes' paintings are the antithesis of the media barrage of ad campaigns chock-full of slick, sexy images and glossy promotion of the "high life." He paints filth and pollution — the by-products consumption leaves behind. These are portrayals of the psychological and physical toll of continually unmet expectations, paintings which investigate his personal inability to engender change in his consuming habits. In turn, they expose the abuse and moral disintegration gnawing at humanity's core in this "imperfect" place.

Simultaneously his choice of color, tonality, and love of paint alchemically imbue his paintings with a richness that borders on the beautiful — similar to the way an Ivan Albright painting, with all its distorted funerary subjects, invites as it repulses. Most importantly, his work is not solely a forum for self-centered introspection, personal confession, or indictment. By presenting a nearly unedited self-exposure in paint, he creates highly communicative paintings which comment on our society and ourselves. He expresses a broad range of human experience, from the tragic image of ruin and despair in "Paradise Without a Match," to the nostalgic whimsy of "Lost Pontiac."

Finally, there is the element of humor threading through all of Lutes' work. It is sometimes a subtle playfulness while at other times black and satirical. Whether a humorous play on words in titles such as "Dr. E. Victor," or a humorous passage in paint, Lutes' paintings are infused with an ironic sense of humor which serves as comic foil to their psychological density.

Scenes of the past and present mingle. "Re-presented" memories form on his canvases — a boy in a blue hat fishing, the agricultural basin of his hometown landscape, his boyhood dog, the drum set from his rock band days, a colloidal form (perhaps a visual analog to some inner torment too raw to paint clearly). Somewhere between representation and nonrepresentation, his paintings narrate a life in our times. We peer at his struggles like voyeurs at a two-way mirror, only to be confronted with the reflection of our own inability to make an impact on the world, our own concessions, complicities, and lack of will. What is to be gained from viewing a Jim Lutes painting? That is for each individual to decide. It is a decision contingent on our own psychological "baggage"; our own sense of human compassion; our own personal understanding of ourselves and our experiences in the world; and — perhaps in the end — our sense of humor.

Robert Sill
Assistant Curator for Fine Art
Illinois State Museum, Springfield

Acknowledgements

We are most grateful to: All the collectors whose gracious loans of these art works made this show possible; Jim Lutes for sharing his thoughts, time, and vision with us; Andree Stone, owner of Dart Gallery, and Gail Forrest who have been unfailingly helpful throughout the preparation of this exhibit.

I would also like to express my appreciation to the following people at the Illinois State Museum, Springfield, and the State of Illinois Art Gallery, Chicago, for their efforts and supporting roles in this project: Kent Smith, Director for Art; Carole Peterson and Jane Stevens Registrars for Art; Terry Suhre, Associate Curator for Art; Debora Duez Donato, Administrator, S.I.A.G., Chicago, Brian Etheredge and Robert Daulton, Preparators/Designers; Mark William Hopkins, Preparator; G. Dennis Campbell, Managing Editor; Amy Knox, Assistant Editor; Orvetta Robinson, Head Librarian, Jim Zimmer, Registrar/Curator/Preparator, Lockport Gallery. Photography was provided by Michael Tropea, Courtesy of Dart Gallery.

Special thanks to Pat Schneider from Alpha Design Ltd. for her patience and help with the brochure design.



"Goodbye Milwaukee Avenue," 1987

Selected Biographical Information

Education

- 1978 B.A. Washington State University
- 1982 M.F.A. School of the Art Institute of Chicago

Selected Exhibitions

- 1989 FOCI: Jim Lutes, Solo Exhibition, Illinois State Museum, Springfield, State of Illinois Art Gallery, Chicago
Solo Exhibition, Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles
Chicago Artists in the European Tradition, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago
Group Show, Chicago International Art Exposition, Dart Gallery, Chicago
- 1988 Solo Exhibition, Dart Gallery, Chicago
Group Show, Chicago International Art Exposition, Dart Gallery, Chicago
Awards in the Visual Arts 7, traveling exhibition, (see awards)
- 1987 Whitney Biennial Exhibition, New York, New York
Surfaces: Two Decades of Painting in Chicago, Terra Museum of American Art, Chicago
Home Front, Family Art, Randolph Street Gallery, Chicago
Solo Exhibition, Dart Gallery, Chicago
- 1986 Recent Art From Chicago, Artists Space, New York
- 1985 Viewpoints: Doug Argue/Jim Lutes, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN
A Chicago Souvenir, Dart Gallery, Chicago
- 1984-86 39th Corcoran Biennial, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

Selected Bibliography

- 1988 McCormick, Carlo. "Fat Chances", *Art Forum*, December.
Hixson, Katharyn. "Jim Lutes", *Arts*, December.
Holg, Garrett. "Jim Lutes", *New Art Examiner*, December.
- 1987 Adrian, Dennis. "Two Decades of Chicago Painting", *New Art Examiner*
- 1986 Horrigan, Bill. "Catharsis Vs. Anecdote", *Artpaper*, January.
Riddle, Mason. "Doug Argue/Jim Lutes", *New Art Examiner*, April.
- 1985 Bonesteel, Michael. "Report from the Midwest:
39th Corcoran Biennial:"The Death Knell of Regionalism?", *Art in America*, October.
Elsasser, Glen. "D.C. Exhibit Mines Art of Midwest to Spotlight a Talented American Region", *Chicago Tribune*, February 24th, pp.24-25
Martin, Mary Abbe. "There's Good News and Bad News to be Found in Regional Art Exhibits", *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, December, p1G.
Richard, Paul. "Funny, Figurative and Fierce", *Washington Post*, February.
"Viewpoints: Argue & Lutes", *Artpaper*, December
"Art Exhibit of Broad Shoulders", *Washington Times*, February

Awards

- 1987-89 Awards in the Visual Arts 7, in conjunction with traveling exhibition, Los Angeles County Museum, Los Angeles CA., Carnegie-Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA., Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA.
- 1985 Illinois Arts Council Grant

*The artist's work is represented in numerous private and public collections.

List of Works in the Exhibition

Jane Gets Her Way 1982
oil on canvas
Courtesy of James and Edythe Cloonan

Mr. Business 1983
oil on canvas
Private Collection

Dr. E. Victor 1985
oil on canvas
Courtesy of Lee Wesley and Victoria Granacki

111 Days 1985
oil on canvas
Courtesy of Scott and Willa Lang

Paradise Without a Match 1985
oil on canvas
Courtesy of Jerome H. Meyer

On a Roll 1985
oil on canvas
Collection of the Illinois State Museum

Lazy 1985
oil on canvas
Courtesy S. Ronald Stone and Dart Gallery

Lost Pontiac 1985
oil on canvas
Courtesy of Hollis Sigler

Mondo Condo 1986
oil and acrylic on canvas
Courtesy of the Ruttenberg Arts Foundation

Sins of Man 1986
oil and acrylic on canvas
Courtesy of the Ruttenberg Arts Foundation

Just To Get From Here To There 1986
oil on canvas
Courtesy of Peter and Ellen Broido

Good-bye Milwaukee Av. 1987
oil on canvas
Courtesy of Peter and Ellen Broido

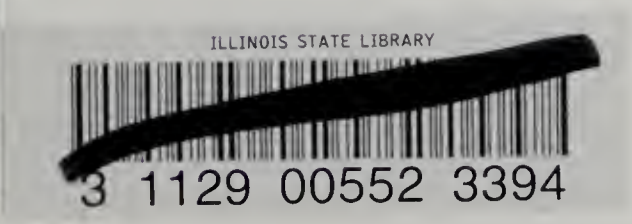
Sawman 1987
oil on canvas
Courtesy of Hugo Sonnenschein III

Chip Off the Old Block 1988
oil on canvas
Courtesy of Glenn Schreiber

**New works will be added to the exhibition at S.I.A.G., Chicago.*



“Sawman” 1987



MUSEUM

September 15- November 5, 1989

Illinois State Museum, Springfield
In the Arts and Sciences Gallery

FOCI: Jim Lutes

Curated by Robert Sill

Illinois State Museum, Springfield

Reception: Friday, September 22, 1989

5:00-7:00 p.m.

November 20- January 5, 1990

The State of Illinois Art Gallery, Chicago

Illinois State Museum

Spring and Edwards

Springfield, IL. 62706

(217) 782-5964

Museum Hours:

Monday-Saturday 8:30- 5:00 p.m.

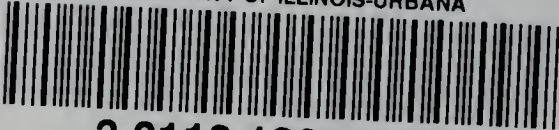
Sunday 12:00 p.m - 5:00 p.m.

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